Fairbury Apostolic Christians Served in WWI

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By 1915, most of Fairbury's Civil War veterans had died. Their grandsons living in Fairbury had no real idea of how terrible war can really be. These grandsons were very patriotic and were ready to enlist in any new wars. The United States also had no experience with managing a conscription or mandatory draft system. In the last great military conflict, the Civil War, the Union Army received less than 2% of its soldiers through the draft.

By definition, a conscientious objector is a person who, for reasons of conscience, objects to complying with a particular requirement, primarily serving in the armed forces. Because the federal government had no experience with a draft, it also had no idea of how to handle conscientious objectors. The government underestimated how unyielding conscientious objectors would be in refusing to bear arms. The military also had no policy or guidelines for conscientious objectors to serve in non-combat roles.

Most of the members of the Apostolic Churches in the Fairbury area originally came from Germany or Switzerland. They often spoke German in public until they gradually learned English. Their church services were usually conducted in German.

In April of 1917, America declared war against Germany. Congress passed a new law, the Selective Service Act of 1917, also known as the Selective Draft Act. Out of the 4.8 million Americans who served in World War I, two million volunteered, and 2.8 million were drafted into the war.

The official position of the Apostolic Church was non-combatant. Consequently, the young men it sent to the armed forces would not bear arms.

Newton D. Baker was the Secretary of War for the United States. His strategy was first to get as many of the churches as possible to send their drafted conscientious objectors to basic training camp. Baker told many of these churches that if they sent their members to basic training camp, the government would respect their conscience. As a result, many conscientious objectors reported to basic training camps.

Baker sent secret orders to the military camp commanders, telling them the conscientious objectors were coming to their camps. He told the commanders it was their duty to persuade the pacifists to take up weapons and join the great crusade to make the world safe for democracy. Baker's instructions also directed that conscientious objectors be treated decently and segregated into separate detachments. The conscientious objectors should be kept close enough to the camp activities that they would be thrilled by the enthusiasm and idealism of the war enterprise.

Baker's strategy was a recipe for confused confrontation. The generals running the military camps were not schooled in the technique of friendly persuasion. Their job was to prepare an army to fight in Europe. As a result, some of the conscientious objectors in the military camps were subjected to humiliation, physical beatings, court-martial, intimidation, and harassment. Some conscientious objectors were given orders to put on uniforms and take up weapons. When they refused these orders, they were court-martialed and sentenced to 15 to 35 years in a military prison. Two Hutterite Mennonites died as a result of mistreatment and ensuing illness.

In his 1984 book, Marching to Zion, Perry A. Klopfenstein recounted that Henry Leonhardt was a member of the Fairbury Apostolic Christian Church. Henry was sent to Camp Wheeler for his basic training. At basic training camp, Leonhardt was beaten until he was black and blue. Because he mainly spoke German, military authorities suspected he was a spy.

Sam Zimmerman, of rural Fairbury, also served as a conscientious objector at Camp Wheeler, although he was not yet a member of the church. He was very much aware of the tension conscientious objectors experienced. In a series of letters to his future wife, Louise Koehl, he wrote, "A fellow sure has to be careful what he does and what he says down here." He also told her, when feeling deep concern about his conscientious objector status, "I feel sorry for the whole bunch of us, but I guess we will have to bear the burden."

Always anxious about how his officers might treat him or where he would eventually be shipped, Zimmerman described the situation as being in "boiling hot water." Zimmerman wrote that seven soldiers tried to force him to carry a gun. He refused. The soldiers struck him with a club. Zimmerman recounted that it was the worst beating he had ever received.

Benjamin Nussbaum wrote two pamphlets about the history of the Apostolic Church. In 1973, he wrote his South Side history, and in 1975, he wrote his North Side History. In Benjamin's South Side history pamphlet, he included five biographies of Fairbury men who served in World War I. These five men all attended basic training at Camp Wheeler near Macon, Georgia.

Emil Bahler (1891-1959) was transferred to the Veterinary Corps after basic training was finished. Jacob Peter (1893-1965) was first assigned to horse-shoeing school. Jacob was then sent to auto mechanic school.

During World War I, the world experienced the Spanish Flu pandemic. The Spanish Flu killed more soldiers than were killed in battle. Cropsey farmer Elmer Steffen was assigned to the Veterinary Corps. While on leave, Elmer died from the Spanish Flu.

Walter Steffen (1896-1980) was assigned to an ambulance company. He was shipped to France, but he contracted the Spanish Flu. He was sent to several hospitals and survived

the Spanish Flu. Samuel Zimmerman (1895-1988) was assigned to the Veterinary Corps after finishing basic training.

Fairbury area Apostolic Christians were willing to serve in the military, but would not bear weapons or kill anyone. They were ready to serve anywhere, including combat zones and support groups. In these support groups, they often helped the sick, the wounded, and the dying. The U.S. military learned from this experience, and conscientious objectors were much better managed in World War II.

Mess Hall at Camp Wheeler in Macon, Georgia. At least five Fairbury Apostolic Christian men received their basic training at Camp Wheeler.